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COUNTRY USSR (Armenian SSR)

REPORT

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SUBJECT Anti-Regime Sentiment, Living
Conditions, and Crime in Yerevan,
Armenian SSR

DATE DISTR. 29 September 1958

NO. PAGES 1

REFERENCES RD

DATE OF
INFO.

PLACE &
DATE ACQ.

PROCESSING COPY

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An eight-page report on conditions in Yerevan, Armenian SSR

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Criminal Organization, Labor Conditions and Anti-Regime
Sentiment in Yerevan, Soviet Armenia

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with the exception of school children, a handful of the more privileged Party members and a few functionaries, the entire population of Armenia, both urban and rural, long for liberation from the Soviet-Russian yoke. Furthermore, three to six months of coping with the realities of life after leaving school are enough to teach former students also to hate the system.

The great majority of these people do not believe there is any possibility of liberation except through a war between the U.S.S.R. and the West. They recognize as a fact the impossibility of revolution in Russia proper due to the passivity of the Russian masses for which the latter are angrily scorned by the Armenians. They also recognize the utter futility of attempting to free themselves by their own efforts. They therefore hope for a war even while they fear it. Conditions are so appalling that they would rather take the risk of being killed in a war than of living a lifetime under Soviet rule. There is always the chance that they might survive and be able to live like human beings again.

By far the greatest single source of dissatisfaction is the pervasive poverty and the stringent prohibitions against most of the free trade activities by which the people might improve their lot.

The Armenians know much about conditions in the West and other parts of the world from their many relatives and friends, from the thousands who returned to Armenia in 1946, and from

western radio

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western radio programs which are fairly clearly audible outside the main cities. They are almost without exception aware of the fact that in spite of harder work they suffer from worse poverty, greater shortages, and more restricted freedoms, including religious worship, than do populations in the West.

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all the Caucasian minority nationalities feel the same antagonism toward Soviet rule. Of them all, the Azerbaydzhani, among whom even the school children hate the Russians, are the most violently opposed. After them come the Armenians and then the Georgians in a slightly descending order of hostility. after the Tbilisi riots in 1920 over 600 Georgian intellectuals (doctors, professors, lawyers, writers etc.) and far greater numbers of ordinary citizens were deported to Siberia.

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Some distinction is made by all these people between the Russian masses, who are blamed for their passivity under oppression, and the Russian Communist Party which is hated as the instrument and, in its leadership, as the originator of the tyranny. Mikoyan was dismissed as a nobody, powerless to do anything for Armenia and not interested in trying. The promised achievement of full Communism is commonly considered "a fantasy, an evil myth, nonsense".

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The population of Yerevan knew perfectly well that the Hungarian revolution was a genuine popular uprising against communist oppression, and sympathized with it. The general reaction to Soviet charges of American interference was that if the United States did help the revolution so much the better. It is only with American aid that there is hope for any of them to be rid of the communists. Everyone expected and hoped for a war during the Hungarian and Suez crises.

In Yerevan, 80% of the Party members, largely those at the bottom levels, have no ideological convictions and have membership purely for material reasons. Among these members,

many are

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many are pro-West in their convictions, believing both that people there live better and that the West is militarily stronger. The population distinguishes among Party members. There are a number who are good, ordinary folk, who are easy to get along with, try to help others where they can, and belong to the Party simply in order to live. Such members are not only understood and tolerated but frequently trusted and turned to in need. At the opposite end of the scale are the ambitious, the selfish, the driving, and ruthless types, among them communist fanatics. These are cordially hated and feared. The better communists they are from the Party point of view, the worse they are from the point of view of the people.

The young Komsomol members are more apt to have communist convictions. However, a few months on any job trying to make a living in the face of the reality of communist practice disabuses the average Komsomol member of his illusions.

Labor Conditions

[redacted] a wide range of complaints against life in Yerevan. First of all, wages are low. Although gross earnings appear adequate on paper, the actual take-home pay is only a small fraction and, in some cases, is literally a starvation wage. Deductions of all sorts are made with total disregard of the wishes of the worker. Such deductions encompass a variety of compulsory taxes including income, bachelor, and childlessness taxes; "voluntary" contributions to DOSAAF, the Red Cross, and a number of local programs; union dues; unavoidable fines imposed largely arbitrarily; and sometimes other special demands. Cumulatively, these deductions reduce take-home pay to a pittance. Rather extreme examples of monthly take-home pay, after deductions, [redacted] were one instance of 44 rubles, two instances of no pay at all, and one instance of actual indebtedness to the state.

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To make matters worse, wage "kickbacks" are universally standard practice. The laborers "kick back" to their brigade leaders, the brigade leaders to the sub-engineers and technicians, the sub-engineers to the main engineers, and the engineers to the project director. The practice does not stop there. Credit for plan fulfillment and over-fulfillment, bonuses, work conditions, employment, and the entire apparatus of labor management and production control operate on the basis of kickbacks and bribery. Unless you conform to this practice, you will not get work, or you will be given the hardest tasks and working conditions, or your work will be credited to someone else, or you will be unjustly fined and so on and on. This is the element which breaks the

illusions

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illusions of students and Komsomol members when they start to work. [redacted] many of these young workers try to resist the system and suffer for it until they become disillusioned, cynical and amenable to it. Because everyone from top to bottom is involved, arrests are rarely made, and it is the troublemaker who tries to expose the abuses and corruption who gets into trouble. Rotten as the situation is [redacted] without the leeway and flexibility which these corrupt practices provide, life for the common man under the communists would be even worse. Now at least it is possible to maneuver and manipulate to a certain degree. Incurruptibility would impose a communist stranglehold under which people would not only be as ruthlessly exploited as at present, but also regimented to a far greater extent with no chance of escaping from or mitigating fatal situations.

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A considerable majority of the Yerevan labor force receives less than 400 rubles per month. An added burden is the fact that monthly earnings are quite unpredictable. As a consequence, everybody begs and borrows from each other. There was a constant stream of friends and acquaintances begging and borrowing for their hungry children [redacted]

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The average summer diet of the ordinary laborer's family in Yerevan consisted of black bread, cheese, green peppers and macaroni, with meat only once every two or three months. Winters were worse, and the diet was frequently reduced to bread and macaroni alone.

Bad as conditions are in the city, the countryside fares even worse. [redacted] starved to death on a Kolhoz in 1943. [redacted]

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[redacted] There has been only a little improvement since the war, [redacted] only during the summer were they likely to have even enough bread on the collective farm.

Prevalence of Crime

People survive in a variety of ways under these circumstances. In the first place, everyone pilfers whatever he can from his work. This is not popularly considered as a criminal act but as a vital necessity. Shortages are so universal that everything has value and can be sold. Not only hand tools, wire, electrical or plumbing fixtures and gasoline, but nails, paper, string, corks, scraps of leather, and literally everything else can be sold.

A good many

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A good many people act as police informers and earn a little money that way. Whoever has a trade which can be put to private practice does so whenever he can. Speculation and private trade and barter are widely practiced. Prostitution is so common that hardly an honest girl exists in the city. "There are no houses of prostitution, the whole city is a bordello". None of these activities fall into the category of crime in the eyes of the populace. Rather, they are accepted as varied necessary means of survival.

Outright crime, on the other hand, is not only widespread to a degree which can only be called fantastic by western standards, but is also organized.

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the criminal elements in Yerevan and other large Armenian cities are well organized.

Yerevan's criminals are organized into and operate as gangs under leadership. Further, these gangs either have extremely close contact with each other or are organized under some over-all leadership. They have an established code of conduct effectively binding upon all members. This code has the following provisions among others:

1. Marriage is prohibited for all members;
2. Honest employment is prohibited for all members, they must live by theft or other criminal activity;
3. Military service is prohibited for all members, (Service is commonly avoided by bribing or terrorizing doctors into issuing certificates of insanity.);
4. Treachery and informing against the gang carries a death penalty even if done under duress at the hands of the police;
5. Mutual help, protection, rescue and retaliation against enemies is required.

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Partly as a consequence of these severe rules the criminals have a high esprit de corps.

The organization of Armenian criminals into gangs dates back to the years of the second World War when they first appeared. Criminal activity was later given a considerable stimulus, which

still persists

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still persists to some extent, by the announcement in 1947 that a new criminal code was being prepared. This announcement brought a great increase in the crime rate because criminals and persons inclined towards crime but previously too fearful calculated that with the appearance of a new code there would be leniency and pardons for those convicted under the old one. Therefore, the threat of the existing code diminished.

The gang or gangs are composed of persons of all ages ranging from children of ten (usually used as lookouts) to men in their fifties. A steady source of new recruits to gangsterism is that group of youth who were frustrated in their hopes for higher education due to lack of openings in the schools.

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there were two thousand applicants for only two hundred openings in the Yerevan institutes of higher education. Advancement within the gangs comes with skill, experience and successful operation. Many of the members continue to live with their parents who are perfectly well aware of their children's gang membership and activities. Others live together in gang apartments. It is in these apartments that most of the planning and directing work is done.

The crimes committed by these gangs range from petty thefts directed against pedestrians to wholesale looting of government warehouses and the murder of militia. The members are frequently armed with pistols, and do not hesitate to use them. The standard action used against individuals who offer resistance, and one which helps effectively to terrorize the population, is a slash across the eyes with a knife or razor.

Cars and trucks left standing in the street unguarded are stripped in broad daylight. Pockets are picked and pedestrians are robbed so indiscriminately that almost no one carries valuables with him or more money than for his immediate needs. Groups of three or four thieves ride up and down in the entries of streetcars in broad daylight, openly stripping passengers of their possessions as they climb aboard. Objections, noise or resistance are dealt with by a razor slash. On one occasion, an old man was being openly searched for valuables on a streetcar by a thief. One [redacted] objected verbally to such shameful behavior and the thief turned on him.

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People are stripped of their clothing. Gangs go systematically through entire apartment houses, taking valuables and terrorizing the occupants into submission.

The criminal activity is also directed against the state. Warehouses are looted, and state stores and other enterprises

are robbed

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are robbed of goods and money.

the cashier of a large state store had been held up and 75,000 rubles taken. In another incident, criminals murdered three militia men to secure the pistols and ammunition they carried.

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The militia have a healthy respect for the gang members and avoid giving them any trouble unless it is absolutely necessary. At the scene of street corner thefts, militia have been seen to turn and walk away, pretending nothing was happening in spite of cries. More frequently, they question the victim at length, taking notes, until the criminal has had ample opportunity to escape. Militiamen rarely carry their pistols for fear of the criminals. In part, the inactivity of the militia was due to immediate fear and to reluctance to expose themselves or their families to later retaliation. In part also, members of the militia are in league with the criminal gangs as a means of supplementing their income.

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the Soviet authorities were not really interested in stamping out crime. some time ago, it was official policy to permit this criminal harassment of the population to keep people so preoccupied with the immediate problems of sheer survival that they would not have time or energy for broader thoughts more dangerous to the regime.

The population of Yerevan is thoroughly terrorized. When gang members are apprehended by the police, witnesses hesitate and often refuse to testify against them for fear of retaliation by other members of the gang. As a result, the culprits are often released with small fines or light prison sentences. One group of three thieves finally admitted to committing ninety-four separate crimes. Criminals caught stealing government property are given stiff sentences in labor camps, but for some reason never seem to serve their full terms. On the contrary, criminals with a record of a dozen or more convictions who, sentenced to twenty five years, were back in Yerevan a year or two later, having resumed their criminal activities.

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bribery, self-induced illnesses and even terror tactics against camp administrators were used.

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recidivism was nearly universal.

in their lawlessness the Yerevan gangsters are locally more powerful than the Soviet government. seriously considered and even

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even to some extent looked into the potentiality of this criminal organization for a coordinated anti-Soviet revolutionary effort.

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rejected the idea for two reasons. Firstly, the criminals are totally apolitical. Secondly, they are infiltrated by KGB agents for the precise and sole purpose of making certain that no political threat to the regime exists.

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the criminal organization did not function nearly so efficiently in the prison camp as it had in Yerevan. Although the criminal prisoners were held separately from other prisoners, they were so infiltrated with spies and informers that no planned opposition could be organized. More or less spontaneous work stoppages did occur on extremely cold days or in protest against poor food.

One of the other locales for extensive criminal activity by the Yerevan gangsters is the virgin lands area, especially during harvest season. Many of the criminals reportedly go to the virgin lands for the three month summer period ending with the harvest. Police controls are even less effective there while the considerable amounts of money on hand and general disorganization make criminal operations very profitable. It is said that murder is readily committed there for as little as 100 rubles.

Soviet Socialized Medicine

and comment on the Soviet workers' paradise dealt with the so-called free medical care.

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interminable waits while suffering from fevers and pains, of refusal of x-ray service because the daily quota of negatives had already been exposed, of callousness, of bungling and of universal bribery and graft. conclusion if one had money with which to pay for it, medical cure of some sort could be bought, but without money one was left to rot. for the very reason that medical practice was so lucrative it was also possible, for the right sum, to purchase a medical degree and a license to practice.

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